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Willing interpreters and receivers: American alumni of the Japan exchange and teaching (JET) program

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ABSTRACT Established in 1987, the Japanese government's Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program has generated more than 60,000 alumni worldwide, half of them Americans. Coalescing over three decades, the American JET alumni community offers a compelling example of how the creation of "willing interpreters and receivers" (Nye) through an international exchange program can yield benefits for both sponsors and participants. Focused on the American JET alumni community's composition and its efforts to organize into an independent actor in its own right, this paper offers insight into a large-scale effort to promote soft power in the context of the strategically important US—Japan relationship. This article is published as part of a collection on soft power.

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Introduction

Established in 1987, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program is a joint effort of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), and Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Program materials frame the undertaking as "one of the world's largest exchange programs" and emphasize its reputation for "enhancing international understanding" (JET Program USA, 2017b). Over its thirty-year history, the JET Program has generated in excess of 60,000 alumni from more than 60 countries. While these numbers point to the global character of the program, the fact that more than half of all alumni hail from the United States is evidence of the program's intent to nurture the relationship between the sponsor and its key strategic partner across the Pacific (McConnell, 2000,2008; Metzgar, 2012,2017,in press). The work presented here focuses on JET alumni in the United States because they comprise more than 50 percent of the total population of alumni worldwide. Moreover, as argued below, American alumni increasingly serve as opinion leaders *vis a vis* Japan in the context of one the world's most strategically important bilateral relationships.

The JET Program recruits young college graduates from participating countries to spend a year or more living in Japan and serving in one of three positions. Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) work in Japan's public schools in partnership with Japanese foreign language teachers. Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) are placed in municipal and prefectural offices and assist in the planning of activities with an international orientation. A small subset of CIRs serve as Sports Exchange Advisors and focus specifically on coordination of sporting events (JET Program USA, 2017a, b). Given that more than three-quarters of JET participants serve as ALTs in English language classrooms, it is natural that the program is viewed most often both in Japan and abroad as an English-teaching program and has often been studied in this context (for example, Butler and Iino, 2005; Crump, 2007; Aspinall, 2013). Formal study of JET as a public diplomacy effort has been less frequent, but the program's structure, including the annual mass import of thousands of young foreigners into Japanese schools and municipalities, lends easily to its consideration as a government-sponsored activity implemented for the long term in hopes of building soft power for Japan.

Writing about soft power, Nye (2004: 16) observes "All power depends on context—who relates to whom under what circumstances—but soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers". In other words, the successful exercise of soft power requires not only that a receptive audience be found for a country's efforts, but that the receptive audience can then be leveraged for continued diffusion of that soft power influence into the future. Discussion below suggests the JET Program is successful at generating individuals who willingly engage with Japan and then use that experience to interpret Japan for their own circles of influence over time. Creation of such interpreters and receivers is necessary, but not sufficient to guarantee soft power success. In contrast to hard power resources, soft power resources must deployed, not held in reserve (Roselle *et al.*, 2014). This leads to consideration of what discussion here suggests may be the JET Program's greatest weakness: The Japanese government's three-decades long failure to establish formal mechanisms for maintaining relationships with alumni after they have returned home. But the emergence and self-organization of a vibrant American alumni community in spite of this oversight points to JET's success as a generator of soft power for Japan. This article considers the American alumni community, highlighting its strengths, but noting that although an emerging national network is poised to serve alumni well, the soft power potential of the JET Program for Japan is yet to be fully realized in the United States.

International exchanges and soft power

Writing about the rationale for implementation of public diplomacy programs, Nye argues that "conveying information and selling a positive image is part of it, but [it] also involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies" (Nye, 2004: 107). The strategies that governments use for building these long-term relationships with foreign publics are broadly categorized as either mediated or relational (for example, Gilboa, 2008; Golan, 2013). International broadcasting, lobbying and nation branding are examples of mediated efforts, while programs such as international exchanges are clearly relational in nature. Gilboa (2008) offers a framework for thinking about public diplomacy activities, categorizing them according to their respective timeframes for implementation, overall purpose, and degree of government engagement. Employing this framework, one sees international exchanges as long-term endeavours undertaken to develop relationships. They are also implemented with minimal government engagement, a key consideration according to scholars who argue that the most credible international exchange programs are those whose sponsors take a hands-off approach (for example, Scott-Smith, 2009).

That relationships generated through sponsorship of international exchange programs can "create an enabling environment for government policies" (Nye, 2004: 107) is an aspect of exchanges that is increasingly acknowledged in the academic literature (for example, Snow, 2010; Golan, 2013). While explicit association of exchanges with foreign policy goals may rankle, in reality this has always been part of the calculus. As a public diplomacy activity, international exchanges are part of a nation's foreign policy tool kit. Heightened attention to international exchanges as public diplomacy stems from awareness that "In a world where national and global interests frequently overlap, engaging in dialogue with foreign publics is a condition for effective foreign policy" (Proedrou and Frangonikolopoulos, 2012: 729). Such sentiment functions as a complement to Cull's (2008: 1) definition of public diplomacy as "the process by which an international actor conducts foreign policy by engaging a foreign public". The goal, another scholar argues, is to create "permanent friends" in support of the host country (Melissen, 2005).

The process through which exchanges are thought to exert influence is indirect and a theoretical explanation requires drawing from several lines of literature. It begins with the goal of creating mutually beneficial relationships, the key premise of Ledingham's (2003) relationship management theory. This echoes the emphasis on engagement that Cull and others have underscored as the *sine qua non* of effective public diplomacy (for example, Cull, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2013). Understanding of exchanges' potential to yield favourable outcomes continues with an awareness of dynamics associated with opinion leadership (Katz, 1957) and diffusion of innovations theory more broadly (Rogers, 1962). Here, it is understood that within every social network there are individuals whose views on certain issues are considered authoritative by dint of experience or other expertise. The views of these opinion leaders diffuse through their networks of family, friends, colleagues and others and have the potential to affect the way entire groups think about certain topics. An exchange program assumes that through selection of participants and their subsequent exposure—hopefully favourable—to the host country, they are creating a cadre of opinion leaders with

respect to the host country who will go on to influence people at home on matters related to the one-time host in subtle ways—perhaps not even recognizing it themselves—for years to come. This is the generation of willing interpreters and receivers referred to by Nye. The long-term goal is to generate a large enough population of individuals favourably disposed to the host country that policies toward it emanating from participants' home countries will be favourably influenced, thus creating an international environment that is more favourable for the host country to achieve its foreign policy goals. Scott-Smith (2009: 53) summarizes this opinion leadership process saying it leads to participants "acting (voluntarily) as legitimate and respected sources of opinion and judgment" with respect to the one-time host.

Continuing with consideration of the processes assumed to be at play in international exchanges as foreign policy tools, one recalls that the purpose of public diplomacy is to shape public opinion abroad. It is here that understanding of public opinion's role in foreign policy appears front and center. As noted by Castells (2008: 91), "public diplomacy intervenes in the global space equivalent to what has been traditionally conceived as the public sphere in the national system". Of course, the expectation that public opinion can influence a given nation's country's foreign policy behaviour is rooted in the democratic assumption that a government acts in accordance with the wishes of its populace. Baum and Potter (2008: 44) articulate this series of democratic assumptions, noting "the public is able to develop and hold coherent views on foreign policy, that citizens can and do apply their attitudes to their electoral decisions, and that this leads politicians to consider the electoral implications of their overseas activities". That there is even a place for domestic public opinion in the conduct of foreign policy is a significant deviation from traditional theories of international politics that long viewed a nation state as an inscrutable black box. But looking inside the black box is the bread and butter of constructivism (for example, Wendt, 1992,1999; Kratochwil, 2000) and it is only within this theoretical framework allowing for consideration of "norms, values, and identities" (Gilboa, 2008: 68) that efforts to engage in public diplomacy can be seen as rational state behaviour.

Even when it is possible to identify the theoretical processes through which an international exchange is likely to produce favourable outcomes for a sponsoring country, in reality the effectiveness of efforts to engage foreign publics—whether mediated or relational—can be difficult to quantify. Indeed, this is one of the primary difficulties facing sponsors of public diplomacy programming (For example: Banks, 2011; U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2014). Relational efforts pose a particular challenge. Whereas mediated efforts to place opinion pieces or to disseminate broadcasts or to lobby on behalf of preferred policy outcomes can be easily measured, metrics for evaluation of relational efforts such as exchange program success are more amorphous. The number of participants engaged in a program is a ready short-term measure, but exchanges are undertaken for the long term and simply documenting the total number of participants falls far short of demonstrating program effectiveness. To capture the range of possible effects resulting from an exchange, one would ideally have the opportunity to survey participants prior to program participation. Contact would continue at intervals after their return home, with an eye toward marking changes in the way participants view the host country, its policies, and its people, while also documenting the networks to which they belong and the venues within which they are positioned to influence thinking about the one-time host. Scott-Smith suggests that two assumptions should guide discussions about exchange programs. The first is that they are undertaken for political purpose. The second is that exchanges have political effects (2009). Using the approach outlined above, the accuracy of both assumptions could be tested over time. But the real world is messier. Discussion below grapples with this reality.

The JET program as public diplomacy

Having articulated the place of exchange programs in a country's foreign policy toolbox, attention now turns to the JET Program itself with an introduction to the program, its goals, and its generation of tens of thousands of alumni over its 30-year history. Discussion demonstrates the political intent of JET while consideration of American alumni and their feelings toward Japan moves toward demonstrating the program's potential political effects.

The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) is the pseudo-governmental Japanese organization responsible for administration of the JET Program. In this role, CLAIR serves as liaison among the more than 1000 municipalities and other Japanese governmental entities that hire JETs, the participants themselves, and the three ministerial co-sponsors. As of 2015, more than 62,000 young people, hailing from 65 different countries had participated in the JET Program, with over half of those participants having come from the United States (CLAIR, 2015).

Brief consideration of the JET Program's origins offers useful insight into the rationale for its establishment. McConnell (2000) documents how the program was presented to the United States in 1987 as a gift from the Japanese government in hopes of ameliorating trade tensions between the two countries. It was the creation of three government ministries, each with its own distinct motivation. The Ministry of Home Affairs (now the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, MIC) sought to internationalize communities across Japan, exposing an otherwise often isolated population to the world at large; the Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, MEXT) hoped to improve foreign language education—especially English—in the country's public schools; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) looked to improve international perceptions of Japan.

MIC's goal since JET's creation has been to internationalize the Japanese countryside, but no academic research known to the author has sought to document the program's performance in this regard. It is a worthy topic for study. The municipal and prefectural offices responsible for employing and managing all JET Program participants are spread across the Japanese archipelago and while JET is marketed as a single exchange program, in practice participants' experience can vary dramatically from place to place, as can the influence of their presence within the host communities. With growing scholarly attention to the role of subnational governments (SNGs) in the practice of public diplomacy, the JET Program has recently earned a few mentions from academics considering the influence of SNGs in Japanese politics (for example, Jain, 2005; Horiuchi, 2009; Shen, 2014).

JET is most often evaluated in the context of second language instruction and the Japanese education system. These discussions are tied directly to MEXT's place in the JET Program equation. This attention is unsurprising since more than three-quarters of all the young college graduates who have joined the JET Program have been employed as ALTs, working in public schools across Japan for periods of a year or more. It is this aspect of the program with which the Japanese public and program participants themselves are most familiar. This familiarity has in turn led to scepticism about the program's performance in the educational context. In addition to multiple academic studies

documenting the program's apparent failure to improve foreign language proficiency (that is, Browne and Wada, 1998; Tajino and Walker, 1998; Nishino and Watanabe, 2008), a leading Japanese foreign policy expert acknowledged to *The Guardian* in the program's twentieth year that "While JET has been successful in forging people-to-people ties, that hasn't always translated fully into the quality of English teaching in public education" (McCurry, 2007).

The frequently negative characterization of JET's performance in the context of foreign language education has diverted attention from another of the program's purposes, one on which, consistent with the aforementioned expert's assertion, JET's performance appears more impressive. The reality, one scholar observes, is "JET is less an issue of education policy than one of cultural diplomacy" (Borg, 2008: 239). A quote from a MOFA official included in a 2002 article about JET drives home this point: "From the standpoint of our ministry, it is a significant part of Japan's national security policy that these youths go back to their respective countries in the future and become sympathizers for Japan" (McConnell, 2002: 65). Such a statement coincides with scholars' increasingly candid contemporary acknowledgement that international exchange programs have realpolitik implications (Snow, 2010; Golan, 2013). McConnell's definitive history of the JET Program (2000) laid the groundwork for making the claim of public diplomacy success for the large scale international exchange effort. But that work appeared early in the program's existence and little formal research has since followed that path. Although Nye (2004, 2008) has often referred to the JET Program, citing it as a successful example of building soft power at the grassroots level, he has not considered the program in any depth. Government officials in both the United States and Japan have similarly hailed JET's role in the bilateral relationship, with Japan's ambassador to the United States in 1994 calling JET "probably the most successful grassroots exchange program undertaken by the Japanese government (Press Conference, 1994) and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011) pointing to JET as a key example of the "longstanding tradition of exchange and cooperation" between the United States and Japan (2009). Praise such as this, however effusive, has nevertheless been based almost entirely on anecdotes. But anecdotes do not data make and they fail to counter the more frequently documented evidence about the program's struggles to perform as a means of improving English language proficiency.

Annual rankings of English language proficiency among the Japanese populace regularly place the country among the developed world's poorest performers, with one survey placing Japan at second-to-last out of sixty economies on this measure (Rosselet, 2013). Festering concerns on these matters contributed to an aura of scepticism in the Japanese domestic political context about JET's overall effectiveness (for example, Hosaka, 2010), leading to the threat of significant budget cuts and even program elimination in dramatic budget panels broadcast nationwide in 2010 (Matsutani, 2010; Shinn, 2011). Fortunately for the program, however, sentiments such as those voiced by Columbia University's Gerald Curtis, who observed that JET was a target of the panels "even though it has been successful beyond expectations" (Curtis, 2011), were acknowledged and JET was removed from the chopping block. The program's fortunes have improved since that close call, with 2013 seeing an announcement from Tokyo's metropolitan government that it would greatly increase the number of JET Program ALTs in its public schools in anticipation of the 2020 Olympics. Moreover, the administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has emphasized the value of the JET Program, promoting an effort that anticipates the assignment of as many of 6400 program participants to Japan annually by 2019 (Fukukawa, 2015). A more personal indicator of Abe's interest in the program was seen in the meeting of his wife, Akie Abe, with high-profile American alumni in Washington, DC during the couple's state visit in 2015 (JET alumni meet, 2015).

When the JET Program's budget—and indeed the program's very existence—came under threat, three prominent American JET alumni published an op-ed in one of Japan's leading newspapers writing that the program was "a triumph of soft power" for Japan and that its "least recognized contribution … may be its most important. This is the remarkable success it has had as a public diplomacy program" (JET ROI, 2010). That JET alumni engaged in efforts to influence Japanese domestic political outcomes with respect to the program is one anecdote that helps to illustrate the significance of the program and the ways in which its alumni and the program overall are positioned to influence the bilateral relationship.

JET's soft power performance

By its own admission, the Japanese government has not maintained careful records concerning the whereabouts of former JET Program participants. This oversight was acknowledged often in interviews with representatives of CLAIR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Office of the Prime Minister (Metzgar, in press). Reasons for this sustained inattention include the decentralized nature of program implementation across ministries and locales around the country, the frequency with which officials rotate through the offices that might be expected to bear responsibility for alumni relations, and genuine concern about appearing too heavy-handed in interactions with alumni. Explanations aside, the result is that the Japanese government cannot easily identify tens of thousands of individuals worldwide who have the potential to serve as goodwill ambassadors for Japan today and into the future. Longtime American diplomat Richard Mei says he believes the value of the alumni community became especially apparent to the Japanese government in the weeks immediately following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, when many alumni—both private citizens and American diplomats—returned to Japan to assist with recovery efforts. While Japan's neglect of the alumni network for the program's first 25 years was a "weak point", Mei (2015, 2017) is convinced that Japan has a keen interest in working with the community moving forward.

The Japanese government may not have contact information at hand to communicate directly with the alumni community, but a 2011 survey of more than 500 American JET Program alumni hints at the potential value of this community—if it can be tapped successfully (Metzgar, 2012). That survey's key findings include the fact that with more than half of alumni going on to earn graduate degrees after returning from Japan, they possess levels of education well above the American average. Alumni also report higher than average levels of engagement in civic and political activities including attendance at political rallies, activism in support of political candidates, and membership in organizations such as religious communities, chambers of commerce, social service clubs, and other groups that comprise the fabric of civic life in the United States. Moreover, alumni report consuming news media at rates higher than the national average and sustained levels of interest in Japan, its culture, its politics, and its relationship with the United States. This affinity for all things Japan lingers long after alumni return home from participation in JET (Metzgar, 2012).

Importantly for making an argument about the success of the JET Program as a public diplomacy effort, when asked to indicate their impressions of Japan using a feeling thermometer ranging from "very cold or unfavorable" to "very hot or favorable," alumni offered an average response equivalent to an 85 percent

approval rating. Other surveys suggest that Americans as a whole have favourable views of Japan, with one such survey reporting that seventy-nine percent of Americans see Japan as a reliable ally and friend (for example, MOFA, 2012). While it is not methodologically appropriate to make a direct comparison between the JET survey and other survey data, it is nevertheless noteworthy that in a country whose population already holds favourable views of Japan, the views of American JET alumni are even more favourable. It is not possible to ascertain from the data collected whether these views result from experience on the JET Program or whether it was favourable views of Japan that led individuals to participate in the JET Program in the first place. Nevertheless, it is clear that American JET alumni have warm feelings toward their one-time host. This suggests they can indeed play the role of willing interpreters and receivers for Japan in the United States. More specifically, given their levels of education and civic and political engagement they are also ideally situated to serve as opinion leaders with respect to Japan and various aspects of the bilateral relationship with the United States.

But minus widespread and ongoing relationships with alumni, the Japanese government has not yet been unable to capitalize fully on a key benefit of exchange program sponsorship. Shortcomings in long-term management of a resource generated by what a key foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe calls "the single most shining crown jewel of Japan's diplomacy" (Taniguchi, 2015) are noteworthy, particularly when one recalls that as a public diplomacy effort, exchange programs are undertaken with the expectation of results in the long term. It is not enough to recruit large numbers of participants for a year or more and to do so repeatedly over an extended period of time. Given the relational goals of an exchange program, relationships established with participants during their brief sojourn in the host country must be maintained over time to ensure return on the sponsor's investment.

Although the Japanese government has only recently begun to discuss efforts for better managing relations with alumni over time, from the start, they had nevertheless anticipated that alumni would seek ways to remain engaged with the program and with Japan after returning home. As Scott-Smith (2009: 54) argues, "for optimum effect, what needs to be created is a wider community or institution that can engage with and encompass the changed outlook of the former participant, so that they can continue to share and develop their new-found perspective". For JET, this wider community has long taken the form of the JET Alumni Association (JETAA). According to a history of JETAA maintained by the Japan Local Government Center, CLAIR's U.S.-based office, the idea for creation of an organization of JET alumni originated with CLAIR when Scott Olinger, an alumnus who had gone on to work at CLAIR's headquarters in Tokyo, reached out to a number of soon-to-be alumni before they left Japan to discuss the feasibility of creating an alumni association. Olinger and CLAIR had drafted the bylaws for JETAA along with a list of cities worldwide where it was deemed desirable to see establishment of chapters (Gillam, 2015).

One participant in this early discussion was Paige Cottingham-Streater who returned to the United States to work on Capitol Hill in 1989. In those days before widespread internet access it was difficult to identify other alumni, but a small group began meeting in Washington. With enthusiastic support from the Japanese embassy there, a chapter of JETAA was born (Cottingham-Streater, 2015, 2017). Soon, through newly created chapters of JETAA, alumni were assisting the embassy and consulates around the country with recruitment and selection of new JETs. They were also providing volunteers for flagship, grassroots events supporting U.S.–Japan relations, including Washington, DC's famous cherry blossom festival.

By 2000, the consul general for Japan in Los Angeles had declared JETAA to be "the most visible and important outcomes [sic]" of the JET Program, acknowledging that the community it had created was a "great asset" for Japan (cited in Borg, 2008: 126). Over time, the now nineteen JETAA chapters in the United States have contributed to awareness of Japan and the JET Program in places across the country (Box 1). Each year, a conference convening leadership from each chapter includes presentations from most of the groups, showcasing the variety of activities that serve to support the JET Program and alumni. Not all chapters are equally active, but many play visible roles in the promotion of U.S.–Japan relations in their communities.

Among those activities, JETAA in New York City participates in Japan Day in Central Park, sponsoring a yo-yo fishing contest. JETAA Minnesota operates a traditional Japanese shaved ice booth at St. Paul's annual Lantern Lighting Festival, and JETAA Southeast runs the children's area at Atlanta's Japan Fest. Meanwhile New England JETAA recruits new JET Program participants at Boston's Japan Festival and Heartland JETAA seeks new recruits at Naka-Kon, a large annual anime convention in Kansas. In addition, most chapters host farewell and welcome home receptions for new and returning JET participants and many also organize networking events, happy hours and seasonal celebrations. All these activities demonstrate the commitment of members nationwide to maintaining connections to Japan for themselves, their families, their friends, and others in their communities.

As impressive as this range of activities is, numbers suggest that only one-third of alumni actually seek out JETAA after returning from the JET Program. This means that while the embassy and consulates have cooperative relationships with the nineteen chapters, their membership represents only a fraction of the alumni population in the United States. Moreover, individuals who do become involved with JETAA are typically engaged for only the first few years following their return from Japan. Soon faced with increased professional and personal obligations, these alumni also fade away from the view of JET's sponsors. This is a particular loss for the Japanese government since these are the alumni who were most driven to maintain formal connections to both JET and Japan once back in the United States.

Box 1. U.S. Chapters of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Association (JETAA)

1. Great Lakes JET Alumni Association
2. Heartland JET Alumni Association
3. JET Alumni Association of Alaska
4. JET Alumni Association of Chicago
5. JET Alumni Association Florida
6. JET Alumni Association of Hawaii
7. JET Alumni Association Mid-South
8. JET Alumni Association of Minnesota
9. JET Alumni Association Music City
10. JET Alumni Association of New York
11. JET Alumni Association of Northern California
12. JET Alumni Association Portland (OR)
13. JET Alumni Association Rocky Mountain
14. JET Alumni Association Southeast
15. JET Alumni Association of Southern California & Arizona
16. JET Alumni Association of Washington, DC
17. New England JET Alumni Association
18. Pacific Northwest JET Alumni Association
19. Texoma JET Alumni Association

While CLAIR and MOFA provide a small amount of funding to the chapters annually for use in coordination of events such as networking nights or recruitment activities, the chapters of the JET Alumni Association in the United States are run entirely by volunteers. With no formal administrative support, institutional memory for each chapter is spotty. The JCLG history cited above indicates regular discussion among members over the years about the need for tracking American alumni, but discussion also indicates that there was always disagreement about how to do it, who would manage it, and for what purposes such information would be maintained. The result is that there has been no single point of entry for engaging the JET alumni community in the United States for most of the program's 30-year history.

An online community, JETWit.com, established by American alumnus Horowitz (2015) in 2008, sought to exploit the potential of interactive communication technologies for the purposes of building a community of alumni. The site has at times filled the void caused by lack of a formal organizational structure for alumni nationwide, connecting alumni to one another, providing updates about Japan-related events, offering leads on Japan-related employment, and serving as an online home for JET alumni not just in the United States but around the world. Its information-sharing role in the aftermath of Japan's devastating earthquake and tsunami in 2011 was illustrative of this fact, but even prior to that disaster, the site had been recognized for its service to Japan and the JET alumni community. The director of the Japan Information Center at the consulate in New York declared that "with its helpful information and frequent updates, JETWit has emerged as the de facto central website for JET alumni. We look forward to JETWit's continued success as a key online resource for former JETs and all those wishing to cooperate with them" (Letter of support, 2011).

Following the 2011 disaster in which 16,000 people perished—including two American JET Program participants—JETWit served as a clearinghouse for information about how to help with recovery and relief efforts. But there was still no mechanism in place for coordinating the response among chapters and individual alumni. That role eventually fell to the New York chapter of JETAA which performed admirably, helping to coordinate the raising of more than US$300,000 for relief efforts (Yuki, 2014). But the lack of a formal communication network among the nineteen chapters; the huge response from alumni who were not otherwise involved with local chapter activities; and the absence of a single point of contact for interacting with the Japanese government, aid organizations, news media, and other actors rendered coordination of a response far more difficult than might otherwise have been necessary. Lessons learned from this experience spurred to action several alumni who had long been concerned with the vacuum created both by the absence of a formal national entity and the absence of Japanese government efforts to maintain communications with alumni over time.

Although challenges in responding to the 2011 disaster highlighted the need for it, the establishment in 2015 of USJETAA as a 501(c)3 non-profit entity to serve as a national umbrella organization for American JET alumni (about which more below) was the result of almost twenty years of discussion dedicated to building national capacity for the community in the United States. Awareness of alumni influence—both real and potential—and the need to harness it had been growing for years. Indeed, in a 2008 speech titled "A Triumph of Soft Power" delivered in honour of the JET Program's twenty-fifth anniversary, James Gannon, JET alumnus and executive director of the Japan Center for International Exchange in New York (JCIE/USA), observed that "the vast majority of the emerging leaders and experts under the age of 45 who are working in fields that involve US–Japan relations are former JET Program participants…[I]t is clear that these JET alumni have started to become valuable resources for US–Japan relations" (Gannon, 2011).

Some of the most moving evidence of this resource has proven to be the fact that many of the U.S. State Department employees called upon to assist on the ground with relief and recovery efforts in the weeks following Japan's 2011 disaster were themselves JET alumni. In fact, today more than 120 American alumni serve in the U.S. diplomatic corps, many of them serving tours of duty at the embassy in Tokyo and on the Japan desk in Washington, DC. But alumni also work elsewhere in the U.S. government, from the Air Force Space Command to Voice of America, from the Federal Communications Commission to the White House, from the Department of Agriculture to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. Both the United States and Japan benefit from having federal government employees who have an understanding of Japan. While the feeling thermometer data presented earlier indicated strong alumni affinity toward the one-time host country, this should not be understood as sympathy for Japan at the expense of the United States. In this vein, one Japanese diplomat indicated that having a JET alumnus as an interlocutor can make for some of the most challenging bilateral negotiations (Metzgar, in press).

The chairman of the National Association of Japan America Societies, Peter Kelley, suggests there is also evidence of the JET Program's influence on unofficial aspects of the U.S.–Japan relationship. He observes that although the many Japan America Societies around the country were in existence well before JET's birth, the generation of so many alumni over the last 30 years has helped feed these organizations in terms of both membership and leadership. Kelley argues that the benefit to these societies is two-fold. First, he says, alumni "know more than Tokyo". They have experience in places around Japan that most academics, travelling professionals, and government officials rarely see. He believes this off-the-beaten-path experience makes alumni especially sympathetic to the Japan America Society's grassroots mission. In addition, JET alumni are recruited from across the United States and frequently return to the same region when they complete the program. This has translated into a pool of people with extensive Japan experience who are now scattered across the country, often in places where such experience would otherwise be uncommon. To support this assertion, Kelley cites the fact that in chapters of the Japan American Society where there are fewer than five staff members, one third of the employees are JET alumni (Kelley, 2015).

But this diffusion of alumni across government agencies, academic institutions, media outlets, think tanks, and many other places in the United States has unfolded with little formal tracking of the process by the Japanese government. The result is that Japan has, so far, been unable to capture the greatest potential benefit to be derived from the JET Program: Access to a large cadre of college-educated professionals likely to have favourable views of the country. Japan has generated tens of thousands of willing interpreters and receivers in the United States, but unable to identify many of those individuals, it is prevented from exploiting that tremendous resource.

Recovering a lost soft power resource

It is the former participants themselves who are taking steps to build national capacity for the American JET alumni community. In 2012 at the annual meeting of the U.S.–Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON), a binational advisory panel dedicated to strengthening educational and cultural relations between the United States and Japan, discussion turned to the growing role of American alumni in the U.S.–Japan

relationship. The Secretary General of CULCON, Paige Cottingham-Streater—the same JET alumnus who had spearheaded creation of JETAA in the United States more than twenty years prior—offered a grant to JETAA chapters across the United States for the purpose of encouraging further growth and development of new activities. But the chapters were unable to take advantage of the opportunity, not for lack of interest but rather for lack of an organizational structure capable of accepting or distributing the funds (Lukaszewski, 2015). When Cottingham-Streater spoke at the annual conference of JETAA leadership later that year she proposed establishment of a national entity with the ability to serve as an umbrella organization for the American alumni community. With the full-throated support of the individual chapters, she coordinated the delivery of funding for a feasibility study and ultimately the recruitment of a part-time project director to guide the process of creating a national organization for the alumni community. These steps led to the formal establishment of USJETAA in mid-2015 as a non-profit organization.

USJETAA's mission is to "provide support and resources to Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) alumni chapters and individual JET alumni throughout the United States in order to strengthen the capacity of the JETAA network, enabling alumni to contribute to the greater U.S.-Japan relationship and to 'bring Japan home' by fostering education and understanding of Japanese culture in the United States" (Mission and Vision, 2016). In practice, USJETAA is positioned to support JETAA chapters nationwide on matters from event programming to fundraising and to facilitate communication among these groups. But it is also intended to serve as a home for alumni who are not members of local JETAA chapters and to act as a point of entry for organizations interested in partnership with the alumni community (About USJETAA, 2016). The emergence of this organization intended to play an organizing role among members of the American JET alumni community is another example of former participants working, in part, to fill holes left by neglect—however benign—of the community by the program's sponsors.

USJETAA is staffed by an alumnus who returned to the Washington area in the mid-1990 s and the board is populated with alumni who fall into the category of what the community has come to refer to as "10-plus", or people who returned from the JET Program more than 10 years ago. USJETAA recognizes that 10-plus alumni are the ones most likely to be well positioned to exert influence on various levers of the bilateral relationship, best situated to assist newly returned alumni with identifying professional opportunities, and best equipped to assist with raising the visibility of JET and its alumni community in the United States. Not insignificantly, these are also the alumni with whom the Japanese government may find it most helpful to re-establish contact for its own purposes, both related to the JET Program and beyond.

Closing thoughts

Given the placement of the majority of program participants in Japanese public schools to assist with second language education, JET will always be seen, both in Japan and abroad, as an English-teaching program. Given Japan's continued poor performance on measures associated with English language proficiency, JET is thus vulnerable to political criticism at home. But the program bears the hallmarks of a successful international exchange effort. Although it has not always been viewed as a public diplomacy endeavour, its value in this regard is increasingly recognized on both sides of the Pacific. Indeed, its performance in this respect may have helped shield it from domestic critics in recent years.

The full soft power potential of the program, latent in the tens of thousands of alumni it has generated over its 30-year history, has yet to be tapped by JET's triumvirate of government sponsors, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but representatives of many of those organizations expressed desire to better manage interactions with alumni moving forward. In the absence of such efforts until only recently, the American alumni community has organized, first into 19 chapters of the JET Alumni Association and now into a single national entity, USJETAA. The national organization is poised to help coordinate efforts among chapters and to serve as a point of entry into the well-educated, well-distributed, and highly engaged population of 30,000 alumni who are favourably disposed toward Japan, even many years after returning home from the JET Program. While created by alumni and for alumni, USJETAA also offers an opportunity for Japanese government sponsors to begin the delicate process of reconnecting with the willing interpreters and receivers the program has generated over the last three decades. By thus closing the loop with its many alumni, Japan's JET Program would take a significant step toward realizing even more of its soft power potential.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were analysed or generated.

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